

Bringing theatre to the children

These children have never been to the theatre, so the theatre has come to them. SARAH SABARATNAM reports on Five Arts Centre's road show for children living in Dewan Bandaraya Kuala Lumpur flats and squatter areas.



OPEN-MOUTHED WONDER ... The children were mesmerised by the performance

THE last traces of twilight have just disappeared and a sense of calm settles all around. As it gets darker, the sky springs to life with little specks and flickers of light that are the stars.

At the Sri Selangor flats in the heart of Kuala Lumpur, a huge crowd slowly gathers onto a cement-floored playground, as if beckoned by the changes in the cosmos.

At first, this assembly is a picture of disarray: children who know nothing of colour prejudices are jostling one another, screaming, giggling, playing *kejar-kejar*. Some attempt stunts on the seesaw.

The adults stand further away. They talk in hushed tones and catch up on the latest gossip.

Then, as if instructed, everybody moves to form a tight but large circle. Children are pushed forward to sit on the floor; the adults willingly stand behind a line.

At the centre of this crowd, a stage has been set up, and four spotlights beam onto it. At the north end of the stage, a shadow screen stands erect.

Figures garbed in black move furiously around. A group of musicians are seated on the floor with flute, tabla, rebana, gong and keyboard.

All this is very new to the residents of Sri Selangor, but their curiosity has been tickled, and so here they are.

Each family had received a leaflet inviting the children to witness an evening of theatre in their very own compound for free.

These children have never been to the theatre, so the theatre has come to them.

Organised by the Five Arts Centre's Teater Muda, what is about to unfold within the confines of the square stage is a puppet show aimed at children aged 10 and below.

To signal the beginning of the performance, drumbeats break through the night air, heightening everyone's anticipation.

Then a modern-day version of a *penglipur lara* walks onto the stage and asks, "*Sedap tak lagu tadi?*" And the kids shout back, "*Sedap...*"

"*Kalau sedap... tepuklah!*" calls the story-teller.

And the children clap obligingly.

The story-teller gives a short introduction to story of Ne Zha (pronounced Ne Cha), about a naughty little "god" (Ne Zha) which hatches from an egg and later gets into trouble with an angry, three-headed dragon.

The children listen attentively. If any of the younger ones start talking, the others quickly shush them.

Finally, the real excitement starts. Accompanied by live music, shadow puppets suddenly appear and begin "playing" on the white screen. This is followed by an onslaught of activity in front of the screen where an intermingling of humans, puppets manned by humans and shadow puppets take place.

The puppets are made from recycled materials: cardboard boxes, old mops, discarded cloth, paper, biscuit tins, plastic bottles, tin

cans and other throw-away stuff.

Sound effects, soap bubbles and the play of lights from the four corners of the stage help to cast shadows and lend different moods and effects to the performance.

The children watch transfixed, their jaws open wide, as the story unfolds.

You can tell the children understand what's happening. There is the occasional utterance of "*eh pokok*" or "*eh... hantu!*" and "*Bukanlah! Anak naga!*"

The cast gets the kids involved by inciting screams, squirms of delight or a clap of hands. Sometimes they ask the children's opinion on what should be done: Should Ne Zha chase the baby dragon? And the kids answer... "*Kejar!*" (Chase!).

After about an hour of this, the kids are still fascinated.

"*Ayo... so nice, ahh!*" squeals Lavania Sekar, 8, twisting her body in glee.

The kids confess they have never seen anything like this.

"*Beslah. Ras macam nak tengok lazi.*" says Mohd Hafiz, 10.

His friend, Mohd Haikal, 9, nods in agreement. "*Seronok! Lebih bes dari tengok TV.*"

For the first time since its inception in 1992, Teater Muda is performing from an open stage.

According to the show's producer, Marion D'Cruz, every two years, Teater Muda comes up with a performance show, combining children, young adults and adults who have undergone a six-month training programme.



LOOK OUT! ... It's the three-headed dragon – the children are drawn to the events on 'stage'. Pictures by SALIM SHAARI

In the past, Teater Muda have performed in schools, the conventional stage, and in a mansion.

"Having it in the open is just an innovative way of doing theatre," says D'Cruz.

This show is part of a road show which kicked off on May 22, performing for children at Dewan Bandaraya Kuala Lumpur flats and squatter areas. The first performance was held at KLCC.

Teater Muda, brainchild of writer-lecturer Janet Pillai from Universiti Sains Malaysia, is dedicated to "generating alternative artforms and images in Malaysia".

But there are other reasons why that evening's theatre performance transpired.

"These children don't have the means or the decision-making power to go to the theatre, so the theatre has to go to the children," says Pillai.

"Even if we keep our ticket prices very low, it is a very middle class crowd that turns up. For these kids, even if the show is free, they still have to take the bus and that will cost them," D'Cruz explains.

Another reason is because TM's visual person, Lew Kung Yew, wanted to see the idea of puppetry taken to a full production.

"He has been experimenting with puppetry made from recycled materials in workshops but

we've never done a full show with it," says Pillai.

Throw-away materials used to make the puppets allow the children here to recognise the materials as something that they can relate to and find in their own homes.

She hopes that they will be inspired enough to use their own throw-away stuff and invent their own puppets to play with.

So why Ne Zha? "We were looking for a legend which had a child as the lead character.

Legends also have the good versus evil theme as well as elements of fantasy and reality. These things are necessary and suitable for the below-10 age group," Pillai contends.

One of Teater Muda's success, according to Pillai, is that it manages to come up with artforms that transcend different cultures.

Ne Zha, for one, comes from Chinese mythology. But Pillai has given it a very Malaysian feel by dressing the cast in silat gear, using shadow pup-

pets and ethnic rhythms and other elements of traditional theatre.

"By incorporating elements from the different cultures, the children watch it without any cultural bias."

The cast, consisting five young children and seven young adults, and the crew have been practising for the show since January.

Their hard work has paid off, as this little encounter I had before I left the venue attests: A little boy who mistook me for one of

the crew tugs at my sleeve and asks, "When are you coming again?" I smile down at him, he smiles up at me. "Come again, okay?" he adds before running off into the night.

NOTE: Marion D'Cruz would like to thank City Hall members who have been instrumental in helping the Teater Muda team put their act together.

"They have not just been supportive but efficient. Kudos to them."



LIVELY ... The musicians who provided the sound effects for the performance